

First Goose Season

Young hunters enjoy the privilege of an exclusive hunt all their own.

Story By Tim Sickmeyer

Flock after flock of Canada geese winged across the overcast skyline. The weather had pushed the birds into central Illinois, setting the stage for the annual Central Illinois Youth Goose Hunt, an exciting holiday tradition and



(Photo by Tim Sickmeyer.)

chance for a group of youngsters to learn from the pros.

Driving from all corners of Illinois the day after Christmas, a group of 45 youngsters and a parent or guardian assembled for a kick-off banquet and a chance to meet the club members and landowners who generously donated some, or all, of their blinds or pits in Fulton, Knox, Peoria and Tazewell counties. To help ensure that the youth

Kicking off the youth goose hunt was a banquet, where participants were awarded door prizes and reminded of the importance of firearm safety.

Although he has been hunting for five years, the youth hunt was 11-year-old Michael Varley's first goose hunt.

had a great experience—in many instances this was their first waterfowl hunt—these volunteers also provided their expert guide services.

The banquet room hummed with excitement after the welcoming meal and brief safety talk as door prizes were awarded and hunting host assignments announced. Knowing an early departure was required the following morning, groups met to make arrangements, then headed off to try and get some sleep.

The day dawned early, and by 6:30 a.m. hunting parties were settled into their pits. This year, the geese did not disappoint and began flying a half-hour later, flying most of the morning.

Although she had been hunting for 2 years, this was 13-year-old Nicole Szabo's first goose hunt.

"The goose hunt just sounded fun," Szabo exclaimed. "And even though we had to get up early, it was worth it because it was a great way to spend time with my dad."

Spending time with a parent also was a motivation for first-time hunter Jessica Jostes.



(Photos by Stacia Monice.)



Lending a hand

The youth goose hunt would not be possible if it weren't for the support of generous landowners, blind holders, sponsors and volunteers. The Central Illinois Youth Goose Hunt is one of the premier youth-oriented hunts in the country and is a perfect way to expose kids to a total hunting experience.

Door prizes included a couple of new shotguns and a lifetime hunting license provided by the Illinois Conservation Foundation. Participants each received an Illinois River goose call from Dave Jackson Calls, a commemorative goose band and an assortment of information.

If you would like to sponsor a young hunter or are interested in providing a hunting opportunity for the 2009-2010 youth hunt, contact Joe Robinson at (217) 785-8060.

"The best part of the day was when I was getting ready to shoot a goose," 11-year-old Jostes said, despite the fact that she went home with an empty cooler.

Veteran sportsman Michael Varley started hunting at age 6, although this was the 11-year-old's first goose hunt. Like the others, Varley cited his reason for participating as a "chance to hang out with his dad and friends," and he

Not all the youth were successful in harvesting geese, yet all claimed their limit on memories and smiles.



(Photo by Ben Hillbrand.)

was thrilled to harvest his first goose when they were present.

Across the four-county area, young men and women watched the action as geese cupped their wings and floated into the decoys. But not always. Sometimes the birds flew out of range, a lesson learned about hunting—and life—that despite hard work, your goal may fall just out of reach. Yet there's always tomorrow to try again.

As the sun started to fade, gear was carried from the pits to waiting cars. Young and old alike stood around campfires, fueling their bodies for the trip home and recounting the hunt.

Twenty-five youngsters took a goose home that day, but all participants reached their limit on memories and

Most of the youngsters involved in the youth goose hunt cited spending time with their father and friends as a big reason for participating.

smiles. Veterans of the goose pit had shared their knowledge and contributed to the development of a new crop of sportsmen and women.

The day was a success.



Sergeant Tim Sickmeyer is a District Supervisor with Illinois' Conservation Police.

Additional youth waterfowl hunts

In addition to the winter holiday season hunt, youth 15 years of age or younger can participate in Youth Waterfowl Hunting days, where hunters have two days of exclusive waterfowl hunting (see annual Digest of Waterfowl Hunting Regulations at www.dnr.state.il.us for dates). Participants must have a hunting license and HIP registration/certificate, unless hunting on property where they reside. No stamps are required for youths under 16. An adult at least 18 years of age must accompany the youth hunter into the field. This adult cannot hunt geese, ducks, coots or mergansers but can participate in other open seasons.



(Photo by Dan Daly.)